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SUBJECT: JUBA JOURNALISTS DISCUSS ELECTIONS

¶11. (SBU) Summary: At ConGen Juba's monthly journalism club gathering 16 media representatives related their pessimism regarding the readiness of civil society to support the highly complex elections in 2009, but agreed that even if the outcome is flawed, the creation of a democratic state is an evolutionary process. They agreed the media have a responsibility to use the elections to educate civil society so that people will, over time, grow to understand their role in promoting good governance. End summary.

¶12. (SBU) ConGen Juba has initiated a monthly media gathering in order to foster information sharing and informally build the capacity of the South's nascent media. At the meeting held on August 21, the topic for discussion was the proposed 2009 elections.

Participants, including 16 representatives of state and public television, radio and print media, were generally pessimistic concerning the probable outcome of the elections. Many felt that if GNU President Omar al Bashir is indicted by the ICC, as expected, under no circumstances will he step down from power. For that reason, many also thought that GNU First Vice President Salva Kiir Mayardit will not contest the GNU presidency, but instead stand for the presidency of the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS). If the SPLM runs a candidate, the consensus was that it would be someone other than Kiir, although no one could say who they thought it might be.

¶13. (SBU) Despite this obstacle, most of the journalists did expect the elections to take place, even if just in the South. However, the majority also voiced their concern that the forthcoming six-level elections will be far too complex for the majority of illiterate and uneducated Southerners to understand - given that this will be the South's first elections in two generations. The electoral law itself is so complicated many in the room admitted they do not understand all its nuances. The level of civic education programs required to prepare the general (and mostly illiterate) public for the task ahead simply, they said, cannot be accomplished in the time frame mapped out in 2009.

¶14. (SBU) On a humorous note, one newspaper editor reported that his NISS censors speak and read English so poorly that he simply creates bland headlines for his more controversial articles, since they seldom read beyond the titles, and he is mostly then able to publish what he wants.

¶15. (SBU) Every media outlet represented (except for Radio Bakhita) stated that they had NISS personnel reading their news ahead of time and censoring stories not to their liking. The fact that newspapers are generally printed in Khartoum due to the absence of presses in Juba makes it easier for GNU to censor them. Nhial Bol, of the newspaper The Citizen, forecasted that his paper would likely be shut down during the elections given recent negative GNU reaction to his coverage of the news.

¶16. (SBU) The group agreed, however, that despite these obstacles,

the media have a critically important role to play. The creation of a democracy in Sudan, they said, will be an evolutionary process, and even if the elections fail, if journalists begin to educate people on their rights and responsibilities, it will begin to lay a foundation that can be built upon later. The time to start, they agreed, is now. The lack of a media law that clearly sets out free speech protections severely inhibits their ability to perform this function, however. This, coupled with the lack of printing presses in Juba with which to print newspapers (meaning they must be printed elsewhere and flown into Juba), the high rate of illiteracy, and the severe limitation on advertising revenue available to support private radio stations as well as newspapers, makes developing a viable public service media in Southern Sudan a real challenge.

¶17. (SBU) In line with that, and given their inexperience in covering elections with an eye to civic education, the group asked ConGen Juba to provide a workshop on this subject as soon as possible. Juba will come in with a request septel for IIP support for such a program.

¶18. (SBU) Most participants also focused on corruption as a major problem in Southern Sudan, and pointed out that there are few mechanisms available for holding corrupt officials accountable. Attempts by the media to combat corruption are hindered by the fact that there are no laws to protect journalists who report on wrongdoing, and no code of laws under which corrupt officials can be effectively prosecuted. However, most of the media representatives emphasized the need to build alliances between journalists and institutions such as the Anticorruption Commission and members of the Southern Sudanese Legislative Assembly to build support for anti corruption strategies.

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¶17. (SBU) Comment: The media in Southern Sudan are still underdeveloped and only beginning to perform a role as public "watchdogs." The lack of a media law that clearly sets out free speech protections severely inhibits their ability to perform this function. However, these journalists also feared that a media law hostile to their work would also be a problem. ConGen Juba will continue to look for ways to work with the nascent southern Sudanese media to try to help build it into the strong public information service the South needs.

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